

Ray Mears

Presented by Don Maurer for induction to the Dover Historical Society's

Hall of Distinction April 23, 2023

It is my honor to present Ray Mears for induction into the Hall of Distinction today. He will join two of his 1944 Dover High School classmates; George Elford and Tom Patton. Those three individuals remained lifelong friends.

Ray was born in Dover, Ohio on November 8th 1926. While in high school he played on the basketball team. But in his sophomore year illness forced him to miss the season and so his coach Dutch Furbay suggested he coach one of the Dover Elementary School's basketball teams. Ray proceeded to coach Dover Avenue's team to the city championship. One player on that team was a young boy named Jack Ream. Remember that name. It was that experience that inspired Ray to think of coaching as a career.

After graduation in '44 Ray took a job at a factory to earn money for college. Some place named Reeves. After a year and a half working there he enrolled at Miami University in Ohio.

He did make the basketball team at Miami and played a little, but was far from a star. Still the friendships he made lasted a lifetime. One player was a guy named Ara Parseghian who later became the head football coach at Notre Dame.

After graduating from Miami, Ray took the head coaching job in basketball at Cadiz High School. He was there one year before enlisting in the service for the Korean War. He returned from his service and applied for the basketball position at West Tech HS in Cleveland and got that job. He was there 4 years and turned the basketball program into a winner. That work was noticed by Wittenberg University who offered him the head basketball position.

Ray was at Wittenberg six years and not only turned that program into a winning one, he began to establish the type of coach he would become in college. His success on the court was matched by his innovative approach to marketing and his ability to make basketball popular and to attract large crowds. He had a huge Tiger face painted on a plywood board with the mouth wide open. At the player's introduction he would turn out the arena lights and cast a spot light on the mouth of the Tiger and each player would step through it when introduced. He capped his 6 year run at Wittenberg with the Small College National Championship in 1961. Then came the call to Tennessee.

Ray Mears has been called the “Father of Tennessee Basketball”. He took over a program that was a distant second to the football program at Tennessee. Using his skill on and off the court he turned Tennessee into a basketball power in the SEC and nationwide. It was Ray Mears who began to refer to Tennessee as “Big Orange Country”. An administrator noted that Ray made being a Tennessee fan inclusive to everyone not exclusive to only alumni. He was credited with suggesting to the football band they form a “T” for the team to run through before the game and some have even suggested it was Ray who thought “Rocky Top” would be a better fight song than the one they had. Those two things are considered today as great college football traditions.

Of course none of this would have mattered too much if Ray had not been successful as a coach. He was more than successful, he was outstanding. He coached college basketball for 21 seasons and never had a losing season. His record at Wittenberg was 121-23 with 4 conference championships in 6 years plus the National Championship in 1961. His record at Tennessee was 278-112 with 7 seasons of 20 victories. His career winning percentage of .747 ranks very high in college basketball. His impact went beyond the basketball court. The lessons he taught and the character he showed made his players better people besides better basketball players. The testimonials from former players center on one thing- they are better people for having played for Coach Mears.

When Ray Mears died on June 11, 2007 his obituary was in the New York Times. That should illustrate the importance of his life. He is survived now by his wife Dana and his three sons, Steve, Mike, and Matt.